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ABSTRACT

According to the Educational Reform Chicago Study Group, the traditional public school's text-paced classroom environment may be too bare, especially in poor neighborhoods, to help poor students learn, or too middle class to motivate all students to participate. We need to examine our present teaching methods, existing educational research, and research that could help solve educational problems in the future. This paper presents nine recommendations for linking educational research to improving the learning environment for economically disadvantaged children. These recommendations include: (1) building reform on the basis of educational research; (2) providing more incentives for educational research; (3) conducting research on Chicago reform plans; (4) learning from the lessons of past reform efforts; (5) urging policy makers to consult research sources; (6) organizing a legislative subcommittee on educational research; (7) providing funds for reform-oriented research; (8) conducting research on assisting poor students; and (9) setting up bold pilot educational programs in poor neighborhoods. Each recommendation is amplified by numerous research-based observations. (26 references) (MLH)

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM PRESENTED TO THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE ILLINOIS SENATE MARCH 31, 1988, STATE OF ILLINOIS BUILDING, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Alexander Makedon
Educational Reform Chicago Study Group

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM
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RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: BUILD REFORM ON THE BASIS OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

RECOMMENDATION 2: MORE INCENTIVES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

RECOMMENDATION 3: CONDUCT RESEARCH ON CHICAGO REFORM PLANS

RECOMMENDATION 4: LEARN FROM THE LESSONS OF PAST REFORM EFFORTS

RECOMMENDATION 5: POLICY MAKERS SHOULD CONSULT RESEARCH SOURCES

RECOMMENDATION 6: ORGANIZE SUB-COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

RECOMMENDATION 7: PROVIDE FUNDS FOR REFORM-ORIENTED RESEARCH

RECOMMENDATION 8: CONDUCT RESEARCH ON HOW TO HELP POOR STUDENTS

RECOMMENDATION 9: SET UP BOLD PILOT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN POOR NEIGHBORHOODS

Amplification

RECOMMENDATION 1: BUILD REFORM ON THE BASIS OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Chicago Public Schools should operate on the basis of research on educational achievement. Public schools are evaluated on the basis of student academic achievement, or at least as such "achievement" is presently measured by standardized academic tests (Boocock, 1980, pp. 191-211). School reform could help improve those school conditions which studies show correlate with academic achievement. There have been hundreds of controlled studies that show which methods, styles, or environments seem to correlate with higher student academic achievement in the public schools. Several comprehensive syntheses of empirical research on academic achievement are included in the most recent edition of Handbook of Research on Teaching (published every ten years; Wittrock, 1986). In spite of the emphasis on academic achievement results, and the availability of research studies in this area, so far educational research seems to have been largely ignored by educational policy makers (Nelson and Shaver, 1985, p. 420; Tyler, 1978, p. 97). Why is this so? Could it be, as Joseph Cronin claims, that educational change has historically been more the result of economic and political forces, than of educational research? (Cronin, 1978, pp.

19-20). Even where there is apparently some research done prior to reform, it is frequently so politically "motivated," that it may be "unscientific." As Benjamin Bloom put it, regarding school evaluation, "evaluators are selecting classrooms and teachers where they are certain that the program is actually being implemented in the intended ways before applying their evaluation procedures." (Bloom, 1978, p. 76) In other words, evaluators may be avoiding finding anything negative about classrooms; they would rather pre-judge their evaluation results, than allow the chips of their evaluation procedures fall where they may. Unfortunately, this approach may not allow the objective observer of schools to discover what areas may need to be reformed, what works, or how to design learning-effective schools. So although there may be hundreds of studies being carried out on the conditions that promote student academic achievement, when it comes time to actually evaluate schools, there is resistance to evaluating the schools objectively, let alone apply in public schooling the results of educational research. Recent school reform efforts may make it increasingly difficult to hide or "cover" certain widely known facts, such as, the great disparity in the learning rates between poor and middle class students (Boocock, 1980, pp. 39-64; Coleman, et. al., 1966).

RECOMMENDATION 2: MORE INCENTIVES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Educational researchers use the research techniques of social scientists, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and history, to test, discover, or predict the learning results of different teaching methods (Borg, 1987). Why can't we do the same in Chicago? Why don't we first test, at the pre-implementation level, the learning effectiveness of our educational reform plans? Why should we spend large sums of money on implementing reform plans whose learning effectiveness is too readily assumed? As N.L. Gage (1985), Robert M. Gagne (1978), Walter R. Borg (1987), and others who dealt with educational research issues have pointed out, not only is educational research usually either ignored or misapplied, but of the enormous sum spent on public education, a very miniscule part is spent on educational research. This contrasts sharply with the amount of money reserved for research activities in other fields, such as, agriculture, engineering, or medicine (Borg, 1987).

<u>Historical Precedents of Parent-controlled schools</u>

Perhaps a few examples here may illustrate how research may help us re-think how we redesign educational situations to help students learn. There is much talk about parent-controlled schools in Chicago. Parents in Chicago may have a legitimate complaint against a school bureaucracy that may have become too removed from

their local concerns, or too impervious to educational reform[1]. There is historical evidence that parent-controlled schools may not necessarily lead to "better" schools, meaning, to higher academic achievement. For example, before the creation of public schools, most schools were almost totally controlled by parents. They were known as "district schools." (Church, 1976, pp. 3-22). Historical evidence suggests that such schools, which were usually one-room schoolhouses, were of a very low quality, hired unqualified teachers, taught only the very basics, and put more emphasis on discipline than on academics. Hence the heavy reliance by district schoolteachers on corporal punishment. Teachers were sometimes so unqualified that some knew less than their students. Obviously, the parents who controlled these schools did not always consider academic achievement for their children to be the most important goal of their schools. Although there may have been certain aspects of the district school in pre-public school days that we could learn from today, such as, "ungraded" classrooms (which was done more out of necessity than choice), or the extensive use of spelling bees, overall the district school may be characterized as academically worse than most public schools today. This historical review is made here only to point to the possible drawbacks of certain reform plans. The question regarding the wisdom of parental control is raised here to underline the importance of reviewing available research evidence, raising appropriate questions, or in the event there is not enough research to guide us, conducting pre-implementation research studies, or at least setting up experimental pilot programs. We recommend that prior to the system wide implementation of a reform plan, we should first study its learning effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATION 3: CONDUCT RESEARCH ON CHICAGO REFORM PLANS

What guarantee is there that public schools in Chicago will not become actually worse under a plan that gives parents almost total control over their schools? It may turn out that in fact they will improve greatly. The point here is not that we should or shouldn't follow this or that reform plan, but that we should first study it experimentally prior to applying it on a system-wide basis. After all, the district school analogy may be irrelevant: social conditions may have changed, parental expectations may be different, and teacher training may have improved since district school days. If so, public schools under direct parental control couldn't possibly revert back to the one-room schoolhouse methods. Nevertheless, we will not know for sure unless we set up a pilot experimental school that is parent controlled, or study the

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[1]See the views expressed in their handouts and publications by such groups as the Citizens Schools Committee, The Concerned Parents Network, Taxpayers for Responsible Urban Education (TRUE), Reconstruct Education with Students, Parents, Educators and Community Together (RESPECT), and others.

learning effectiveness of those schools that have opretated under similar guidelines elsewhere.

RECOMMENDATION 4: LEARN FROM THE LESSONS OF PAST REFORM EFFORTS

There are several examples of the relevance of research to school reform. Two such examples are mainstreaming and Head Start. At the beginning of the implementation of PL 94-142, "Education for All Handicapped Children Act," we may have gotten so carried away with the concept of mainstreaming all handicapped students, that we indiscriminately forced many handicapped students into regular classrooms that shouldn't be placed there. As a result, some of the handicapped did worse, academically, than before they were mainstreamed (Baum, 1979; Semmel, Gottlieb, and Robinson, 1979). This doesn't mean that we should have never mainstreamed such students, as we may consider the non-academic effects of such mainstreaming, such as, building relationships with non-handicapped students, to be more important than academic results, yet we didn't even know the possible academic consequences of our reform efforts on the basis of which to make a decision until after we had already decided that mainstreaming should be applied on a system-wide basis. Furthermore, we are not sure that mainstreaming has universally had even the non-academic or social-type effects that we think it did, and therefore can't justify it on the basis of the relevant social or moral results, or non-academic "evidence," either (even if we do value it for social or moral reasons). A similar analysis may be applied to Head Start (Westinghouse Learning Corporation and Ohio University, 1969). This is but one example of how in public school reform we frequently put the political cart before the horse of evidence, only sometimes to be driven backwards to lower student achievement levels.

RECOMMENDATION 5: POLICY MAKERS SHOULD CONSULT RESEARCH SOURCES

Changing educational reform to a researchable hypothesis may require that education become less political. This doesn't mean that the public should relinquish control to the educational researchers, but that school boards and state authorities at least consult authoritative research sources, such as, studies regarding which innovations are likely to bring about the best learning results in students, or, in the event there have been no studies on a particular educational plan, ways to study the learning effectiveness of that innovation prior to funding it. This is as true for implementing changes in public education, as it is for studying the wisdom of current educational practice.

RECOMMENDATION 6: ORGANIZE SUB-COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Our group recommends that the State Senate and House Committees on Education consider organizing a sub-committee on educational research which:

A) Will be free of political pressure

Members of the subcommittee should be protected from political influences that force them to alter the results, stop a politically unpopular (but otherwise "legal") project, or carry out research within only politically "safe" parameters. In other words, they should be protected from improper outside influences.

B) Free to conduct research in any area of public education

C) Free to report its findings without fear of retribution

D) Funded for conducting research

E) as protected, politically, as supreme court judges presumably are; and

F) expert in educational theory and research

Composition of Research Sub-committee:

Since the proposed research sub-committee will have only an advisory, rather than a policy-making role, it should be composed of "neutral" or politically disinterested individuals. Members should be skilled in research theories and methodologies. Members should be willing to allow the chips of their research findings regarding the learning effectiveness of different reform plans to fall where they may, or to carry out research as "objectively" as is humanely possible. One wouldn't want his medical doctor to be a layman who was simply elected "doctor" without substantial training in medical science. Likewise, one wouldn't want his educational research consultant to have had no training or background in educational research, or, worse, to be a glorified "yes-man" who is willing to whitewash an ineffective educational procedure. He would rather want someone who will research all possible methods of educating, although in practice only a few of the more learning-effective methods may be politically feasible. Whether a method is politically feasible should not be the sub-committee's responsibility to find out, nor should the committee, if we want it to investigate the learning-effectiveness of reform plans freely, be artificially limited to what is politically desirable.

Role of Research Subcommittee

We suggest that if such committee is established, it should investigate non-traditional ways of public education. For example, the subcommittee may conduct studies on the learning effectiveness of a variety of educational alternatives. Some of these alternatives, with a brief description of their organization, include:

--the open classroom: learning in open spaces, uninhibited by artificial barriers
--the free or Summerhillian school: students are free to learn when they are ready
--educational parks: learning inside city parks
--homebound education: teachers visit students in their homes
--schools without walls: using the whole city as the school
--project-type schools: learning through student projects
--schools modelled after the university model: includes emphasis on research, discussion, exploration, freedom of speech
--magnet schools: each school specializes in a subject area, attracts parents to the school through the quality of its programs
--Montessori schools: children learn through adult-like activities
--library-based schools: using libraries as the central place for learning
--socratic-approach schools: based on the socratic method of critical questioning
--work-study schools: alternate work with study, bridge the gap between theory and practice
--art-based schools: focus on the artistic development of the student
--existential choice-based schools: students are free to choose, but also responsible for their curricular and other choices
--Rousseau-like country-based schools: learning in and through nature (animals, farm, etc.)
--peer-teaching schools: based on a network of students teaching students, supervised by teachers
--military-type schools: schools modelled after military academies
--Dewey-like schools: students use the school as a "laboratory" to test scientifically the "truth" of ideas
--tutorial schools: one-on-one tutoring

RECOMMENDATION 7: PROVIDE FUNDS FOR REFORM-ORIENTED RESEARCH

Money should be directed, first, toward educational research; and, secondly, toward those educational reform plans that have been shown in research to improve student academic achievement. There are hundreds of research results which consistently report similar findings regarding academic achievement in the public schools (Boocock, 1980). These findings may show ways of improving the learning effectiveness of public education. For example, it has become common knowledge for over 20 years in educational sociology circles that the social class background of students is the single most important predictor of student academic achievement in public schools (Coleman, et. al., 1966; Jencks, et. al., 1972). This runs on the face of the suggestion, frequently aired in educational reform meetings in Chicago, that all we need do to improve schools is throw more money on them. Although money may be necessary in educational reform, more of it without prior research on how to improve schools may fail to improve them. This is so because additional funds may do no more than multiply precisely those

educational arrangements which cause lower academic achievement, in the first place.

RECOMMENDATION 8: CONDUCT RESEARCH ON HOW TO HELP POOR STUDENTS

Several research studies have shown that middle class students score consistently higher on academic achievement tests than lower class students. They also seem to indicate that public schools are middle class institutions that favor middle class students (Anyon, 1983; Clark, 1965, 1972). Sarane Boocock's encyclopedic book on the sociology of education (1980); the experiment by Rosenthal and Jacobson on teacher expectations (1968); and Ray C. Rist's classic study of teacher expectations in a ghetto classroom (1970), collectively show that within public schools student learning correlates highly with teacher expectations. Specifically, teachers seem to have middle class values, expect more from middle class students, who in turn try hard to meet their teachers' expectations. This is why we suggest that in school, where we presumably have at least some control over what is going on, teachers, and the so-called "hidden curriculum" of school (including its structure, rules, and administration) should expect a lot from all our students, and not just those who have middle class outlook or origins. The present traditional school, with middle class teachers who consciously or unconsciously may be "discriminating" against non-middle-class students; its middle class structure; and reward and expectations policies, may be expecting disproportionately more from middle class students to succeed. In the end, the middle class "bias" of the school may partly explain why middle class students score higher than lower class students. Willard Waller's classic study on teacher-student antagonisms inside the traditional public school (1932); Dan C. Lortie's 5-town emprical investigation of teacher characteristics (1975); Philip Jackson's study of life in the classroom (1968); Wayne Gordon's study of the high school (1957); and McPherson's in-depth analysis of power cliques within a single school (1972), and tens of other in-depth studies, illustrate how easy it may be to overlook academic achievement by poor students in a system that may be too middle class to allow research to change it, or at least to challenge it. Our lower class students may be failing more because we expect them to, than because they can't learn. The fact that we chose the traditional school-model for our public schools may say more about us as a nation, than it does about the inability of poor or disfranchised students to learn.

RECOMMENDATION 9: SET UP BOLD PILOT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN POOR NEIGHBORHOODS

According to Jonathan Kozol, public schools in poor neighborhoods are often seen by those who live there as "enemy fortresses," too aloof, socially, to function as a vital part of the surrounding community (Kozol, 1970, 1972). Why not begin to study the learning effectiveness of educational alternatives that

capitalize on the strengths of economically poor students, rather than punish them for their "weaknesses?" For example, why not give credit to students for learning through community projects? For example, students could learn architecture, civil engineering, or trades not only by reading from a text inside a classroom, or by applying theory in the school laboratory, but by rehabilitating old homes in their communities. As a result of their rehabilitation projects, they may learn a variety of science-related subjects, such as, the chemistry of different materials, and a host of social and environmental issues, including legal and political issues, management, and economics. Without such knowledge, they could not successfully rehabilitate a building, let alone build one from scratch. As a result of their community projects, they may gain a sense of accomplishment and pride for having had a positive impact in the community in which they live. Their accomplishments may make them feel taller in their peers' eyes, and motivate them to go on learning to continue their rehabilitation projects. This example is presented here not as a solution to poor academic achievement, but as an example of a researchable hypothesis that holds some promise.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE IMPERATIVE OF REFORM BASED ON RESEARCH

The text-paced classroom environment of the traditional public school may be too bare, especially in poor neighborhoods, to help poor students learn, or too middle class to motivate all students to participate. We need to re-examine our present teaching methods, the educational research that has been done so far, and the research which could help us solve our educational problems in the future. Under the guidance of the proposed research subcommittee, such research could become the socratic gadfly of all our present or future reform plans.

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